SCULPTING ORGANIC ORDER: THE NATURE OF ORNAMENT

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Abstract

This paper presents academic and practice based research. Exploring the concepts of ornament, pattern, and decoration, it aims to define these terms as they are applied in the research and studio. The role of ornament in Modernism, examples of ornament in nature, and nature inspired ornamental forms throughout history are examined. It considers the marginalized position of craft in relation to fine art, and illustrates the shifting nature of this relationship in the work of artists who use craft mediums. The association of decoration and craft with the feminine and “women’s work” is also explored. The methodology for the artwork involves research that is influenced by a formative undergraduate degree, a reflexive studio practice, conventional scholarly research, observation of natural forms, and adaptation of patterns in nature to consumer objects. The methodology describes the use of both craft materials, such as ceramics and textiles, and fine art materials as an ornate responses to Minimalism. The paper presents a selection of artworks that use this methodology as examples of these responses.

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Introduction

During the Master of Applied Arts program at Emily Carr University, I continued my life-long pursuit of an inquiry into organic forms, manufactured ecologies, and ornament inspired by nature. The research produced in and out of the studio has ferried me from fabricating ambiguously sexed underwater organisms created in ceramic, fabric, and steel, to a more design oriented practice focused on the investigation of ornament, pattern, and decoration through the use of craft materials.

Throughout this paper I explore historical precedents and contemporary work through the lens of my own practice. The ideas and research in this essay are informed by my thesis project, and it is for this reason that I discuss specific parts of the body of work created at Emily Carr University throughout the essay.

The choice to explore the ornament of nature is rooted in a deep formal appreciation of naturally occurring configurations, such as the meandering veins in a leaf, the symmetrical arrangement inside of a pomegranate, or the curled tendril of a fennel head fern. Organic forms have been utilized in past works, but during this degree the emphasis has shifted to focus on the ornament inherent in natural structures.

Chapter One: Methodology/Method

1.1 An Intuitive Material-Based Process

Before I came to Emily Carr, my practice included a variety of materials, such as ceramics, textiles, steel, and spray paint. Due to my formalist undergraduate training, I was initially seduced with rejecting the medium specificity that Greenberg had instilled in Modernism[1]. Throughout my graduate degree, I have continued to explore a variety of media, gravitating towards disciplines that have been historically associated with craft, such as ceramics and textiles.

My relationship with Modernism is complicated.[2] I was trained to appreciate the formal qualities in an artwork first and foremost. When I refer to the word formal, I mean the purely visual aspects of the work such as colour,

[1] Medium specificity holds that "the unique and proper area of competence" for a form of art corresponds with the ability of an artist to manipulate those features that are "unique to the nature" of a particular medium, a term that was popularized by Clement Greenberg in his 1960 essay “Modernist Painting”.

[2] Modernism, arguably occurring from around 1910 to the mid nineteen seventies, is a term that is widely debated. Few scholars argue that it began before 1860 and some believe it ended at its height in 1945. I am using the term to apply to work made between Modernism’s beginnings during the years of 1860-1910, and maintaining that its height was in the 1960s and 70s. It was between the 1940s and the 1960s that what is referred to as 'the modernist paradigm' was beginning to be conceptualized, most notably by the Frankfurt School theoretician Theodor Adorno and the American intellectual and art critic Clement Greenberg. When I speak of Modernism, I am most often referring to Greenbergian modernism. For a brief description of the similarities and differences between Greenberg’s and Adorno’s modernisms, see Petter Osborne, “Adorno and the Metaphysics of Modernism: The Problem of a “Postmodern Art”, Ed. Andrew Benjamin, *The Problems of Modernity*, (Routledge: London, 1989), p. 36.

shape, line, and texture. I was trained as a Formalist, putting these values first and foremost above any context or content in the work. This is still important to me, but it is no longer of primary importance. While I still make artwork in which the visual properties are taken into great consideration, I now believe the artist's intent and the concept or content of the work, aside from formal qualities, also factor significantly into the production of quality art.

Greenberg stated in his essay "Modernist Painting" in 1960 that the essence of Modernism lay "in the use of characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself, not in order to subvert it but in order to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence (Greenberg 85)". While I agree that certain mediums have their own strengths and "characteristic methods", I tend to create work that denies concrete categorization and subverts the idea of medium specificity. I do this by encouraging the use of multiple artistic forms: sculpture displayed as painting, like in Violet Unfurled, (Figure 5), for example. The format is both square and on the wall, two painterly conventions, but in addition the work includes a dimensional element which breaks the medium specificity.

Although I disagree with many Modernist credos, my formative upbringing still left with me an appreciation of the spiritual material practice that was exercised in Abstract Expressionism. I do agree with Greenberg in his appreciation that an artwork be explored in a physical and material way. He wrote about Matisse and Picasso and how they "also appear[ed] to have felt that unless painting proceeded… in its exploration of the physical, it would stop advancing

altogether"(Greenberg 792). Greenberg's vision favored these artists because they "conceived of pleasure… in luscious color, rich surfaces, decoratively inflected design" (Greenberg 792). Experiencing physicality during art making and also in the finished artwork is central to my practice.

Figure 1: Stephanie Jonsson, *Leukocytes' Nuptials,* 2012. Mixed Media. 36" x 36" x 24" Photo: Stephanie Jonsson. Used by permission of the artist.

During the creation of *Solar Powered Plastic Plant* (Figure 2), and *Leukocytes' Nuptials* (Figure 1), I become aware of my physical engagement with the material and my bodily experience. While creating *Solar Powered Plastic Plant* (Figure 2), throwing on the wheel meant that both arms were engaged, as I was pushing hard against the clay and conforming it to my will. These actions were repetitive: I threw one bowl-like form on the wheel, then another and another. Each one was slightly different, unique in its imperfections, but similar in its basic vessel form. As I was manipulating the clay, I was constantly aware of my body. The strain on my wrists and forearms quickly became painful, and the pain acted as something that grounded me in my physical being. After some time, my body became one with the clay, and I started to relax into the process of throwing. It became meditative.

Figure 2: Stephanie Jonsson, *Solar Powered Plastic Plant,* 2011 (detail). Ceramic, spray paint 36" x 24" x 2". Photo: Stephanie Jonsson. Used by permission of the artist.

Being embodied in my artistic experience allowed me to reflect on my bodily experience as a woman and, in turn, feminist perspectives on the body. Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Jean-Paul Sartre are perhaps the most widely read phenomenological philosophers. Phenomenology is defined generally as the study of structures of experience, or consciousness. But it was French philosopher Simone De Beauvoir (who was co-incidentally Sartre's unmarried life partner) who wrote extensively on phenomenology from a feminine perspective. She agreed with Merleau-Ponty and Sartre that "to be present in the world implies strictly that there exists a body which is at once a material thing in the world and a point of view towards the world" (De Beauvoir 39). The fundamental essence of her account, however, was that this bodily awareness was different for men and women.

The binary separation of mind and body is often thought of as the opposition between men and women (Lennon). This is an unfortunate and problematic assumption, as it regards the female as an embodied being wrapped up in her physical experience to the point where her rationality is questioned. Elizabeth Grosz writes in *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism* that "women are somehow *more* biological, *more* corporeal, and *more* natural than men" (Grosz 14). These gendered stereotypes are not often useful in approaching phenomenology, but it is hard to deny that male and female experiences are fundamentally distinct.

When Simone De Beauvoir wrote *The Second Sex* in 1949, the second wave of feminism was just beginning. It was in this book that she examined the notion of women being perceived as "other" in the patriarchal society. Women have been marginalized for centuries, and although western culture has made great strides in women's equality, I would argue that women are often still overlooked and omitted from many aspects of patriarchal society[3].

As a female artist, I identify with a marginalized status and I am drawn towards methods and materials that are in a peripheral area to more popular and accepted art forms. The attraction towards craft in my practice is in part a reaction to my Modernist training. Craft has been generally overlooked by Modernist artists, designers, and critics alike, and especially in the case of my Modernist professors.[4]

In Modernism, fine art that is appreciated purely for its beauty or other aesthetic virtues is separate and different from making that produces items for practical use, such as pottery, furniture, or clothing. The latter was assigned the title "crafts," and while their usefulness and skill-requirements were applauded, the creation of a craft object was, and by some critics still is, considered undoubtedly less of a unique accomplishment than that of a work of fine art.

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[3] Due to the length restriction of this thesis, I do not have time to explore an in-depth analysis of feminism's history and current status. Some suggested reading on feminism in the arts includes: Wark, Jayne. "The Origins of Feminist Art." Radical Gestures: Feminism and Performance Art in North America. Montreal: McGill-Queens UP, 2006. 27-57; as well as Robbins, Bruce. "The Sweatshop Sublime." PMLA: Publication of the Modern Language Association of America 1.1 (2002): 84-98.

[4] Some exceptions would include the critic Harold Rosenberg, and (arguably) ceramic artists Peter Voulkos, Kenneth Price, and Robert Arneson. Rosenberg's views on craft are discussed in more depth in Chapter 3.

The importance of the fine art/craft division for the valuation of women's creative fabrication is substantial. Although many objects that are created by males are also rejected from the canon of fine art, historically the objects that were created by women were marginalized and the traditional domestic arts were not seen on equal footing with fine arts. This is why there are so few great female practitioners in the early twentieth century in disciplines such as painting and sculpture, for example, because women's place was thought to be in the home producing domestic wares. These objects were thrust into the category of "craft", and the presence of women in the visual arts arena during this time was not as significant as the frequent contributions of men.

Society tends to marginalize both women and their work. Sadie Plant notes that "weaving, widely associated with women, has always fallen between the arts and the sciences, and has rarely been taken seriously" (Plant 256). Women's engagement with textiles and the innovations that resulted from this involvement exceeded the requirement of just providing clothing and shelter for the family (Plant 257). There is a certain joy involved in the process of weaving. Plant notes, "there is an obsessive, addictive quality to the spinning of yarn and the weaving of cloth; a temptation to get fixated and locked into processes which run away with themselves and those drawn into them" (Plant 257). This addictive quality is found throughout many crafts, and in my practice it is a way to engage with my body. The repetitive act of making similar forms allows me to tune into

my physical being, creating an acute awareness that comes from a sensual awakening.

This connection to my body is present across mediums – I am aware of it when I methodically stitch textiles together (such as in *Leukocytes' Nuptials, 2012*), sand wood (such in *The Architecture of Ornament, 2011)*, or throw clay on the wheel (such as in *Mutant Nucleus*, *2012)*. It is also mediated through technology, as I will often utilize equipment such as the CNC (Computer Numerical Control) machine, the pottery wheel, or the sewing machine to guide the manipulation of the materials. I am interested in the differing aesthetics that machines produce, in contrast to the aesthetics of hand made objects. In my work, I attempt to fuse these two aesthetics into a hybrid practice that privileges neither the hand nor the machine.

Figure 3: Stephanie Jonsson, *Untitled Wall Piece,* 2011. Mixed media, dimensions variable. Photo: Stephanie Jonsson. Used by permission of the artist.

In the work *Untitled Wall Piece* (Figure 3), the distinction between the handmade and the machine is explored. In making this piece, I utilized wood pieces from another work, *The Architecture of Ornament*, as a stencil. I then placed the wood pieces over a slab of clay, and traced out the shapes into the clay, using the wood as a guide. In the resulting forms you can see the flaws and trace of the hand very clearly. The edges are rough and bumpy as I chose not to smooth them down, in order to retain evidence of transformation and process and the material particularities of each medium. This evidence of process was further enhanced since many of the pieces broke as they were shrinking and drying, which gave the sharp edges a fractured, ancient aesthetic. I chose to use these "happy accidents" as they were reminiscent of a past decorative architecture, the white glaze giving them a fragile and delicate appearance. In this piece, I allow the material to behave rather than controlling it.

Building off the painterly conventions I was exploring in previous work, I intended to mount the work on the gallery wall. I decided to incorporate vinyl as a machined contrast to the handmade quality of the ceramic elements. By placing these two aesthetics in close proximity, a noticeable distinction between the laser cutter's pristine vinyl and the amorphously fractured clay emerged.

I realize now that my process has always involved my body in an intuitive response to the material. My work is manifested through the experience of molding, shaping, stretching, pulling, sanding, cutting, sewing, gluing, clamping, and tracing. While working with various materials, I intuitively place shapes,

colours, and textures together to see if they are formally harmonious. Often the objects on which I am working will be in close proximity to each other in the studio, and I will have the impulse to combine them together. For this reason, I keep a large variety of materials on hand in the studio.

1.2 Ornament and Nature as Source Material

Figure 4: Stephanie Jonsson, *Mutant Nucleus,* 2011 (detail). Ceramics, fabric, spray paint. 6.5" x 26" x 26 ". Photo: Stephanie Jonsson. Used by permission of the artist.

As an artist, I do a lot of looking. My eye has been trained to consider everything formally – from trees to buildings to garbage cans. This keen

perceptive skill is at work when I explore the world for source imagery. When I was pursuing my undergraduate degree, I lived beside the forest and would take my rabbit for walks every day, sketchbook in hand, and draw the forms I found in the forest. Sometimes the things I found were rotting and dead. Other times, they were blooming and flourishing. Through all of this looking, I have found the most compelling and eye-catching forms exist in nature - they are attractive and I am inexplicably drawn towards them, even if they appear ugly or disfigured.

It is particularly the ornament in nature that fascinates me and I choose to artistically engage with these organic embellishments. In the same way that natural forms can be both alluring and disarming, ornament appropriated from nature can contain a certain kitsch quality to it. Augustus Pugin, who plays a significant role in the history of Victorian architecture as a forerunner of the Gothic revival, was one of the first people who endeavored to characterize what became known in Germany as kitsch, “the vulgarity appealing to an uneducated taste (Gombrich 36)”. My work often appropriates kitsch objects as source imagery. Of course, kitsch is hard to define, and it no longer has a clear-cut meaning, probably because it’s basically linked with the idea of bad-taste which is sufficiently vague and equivocal in itself. Greenberg defined kitsch as follows:

> Kitsch is mechanical and operates by formulas. Kitsch is vicarious experience and faked sensations. Kitsch changes according to style, but remains always the same. Kitsch is the epitome of all that is spurious in

> the life of our times. Kitsch pretends to demand nothing of its customers except their money – not even their time. (Greenberg 12)

This quote gets at the origin of kitsch, but the meaning has changed over the years, and what Greenberg meant by kitsch is very different from more contemporary definitions. Curtis Brown defines kitsch as "a mass-produced item that its purchaser believes endows him with an air of richness, elegance, or sophistication" (9). This definition of kitsch is also considered derogatory, symbolizing works created to cater to popular demand only and entirely for commercial purpose, as opposed to works created as self-expression by an artist. The relation of kitsch to my work is something I question and consider. In some ways, my work is not extreme or ironic enough to be kitsch, as is the case with artists Jeff Koons, Miriam Schapiro, Robert Kushner, and most of the artists of the Pattern and Decoration movement. However, I look to appropriate nature and through that translation it becomes kitsch. I also purposefully locate contemporary objects or images that are already kitsch and use them as source material. So kitsch is more of an inspiration in my practice, as opposed to an actual categorization of my work. I consider it an influence both as source material as well as in the use of digital fabrication tools as a contemporary means of fabrication of mass-produced objects (in the case of the CNC work). Kitsch is also conceptual – a way of thinking. I question the relevancy of kitsch to my own

practice and consider why decoration and ornamentation often fall into this category and are consequently perceived as frivolous.

Ornament is not inconsequential or frivolous, as it historically held different meanings for various cultures. In Victorian times, for example, interior design was suffocating in its clutter and overly decorative surfaces. This phenomenon was referred to as *horror vacui*, a latin term meaning "fear of emptiness", a term coined by Italian scholar Mario Praz. The decoration served to ward off evil, as the devil could get into any architectural space that was not adorned. Horror Vacui as a visual phenomenon has also been associated with "outsider" art, as is evidenced in the work of contemporary artist Takashi Murakami, Mark Tobey or Jean Dubuffet[5]. It is this asphyxiating ornate atmosphere that I am trying to overwhelm the viewer with, not unlike the art from the Victorian age.

James Trilling, author of many books on ornament, suggests that ornament in a contemporary sense has lost its meaning, asserting:

> If ornament once had meaning (the argument would run), then it once had an identifiable and necessary function. We have lost the meanings, and even the general awareness of meaning in ornament, and as a result ornament has lost its function and even become the antithesis of function. But so long as we are able to recover meanings, we retain at least the ideal of ornament as

[5] My work may be viewed as having an affinity with outsider art, something that I have not developed in depth in this essay, although it promises to be an intriguing subject for future research.

> something necessary and functional, and there remains at least the hope of restoring it to this former state. The search for meaning in ornament may thus be symptomatic both of an unwillingness to reject ornament altogether and of unease with ornament as a purely visual phenomenon --a mere elaboration. (Trilling 52)

This phenomenon drives my practice. The disappearance of meaning from ornament, which has been appropriated from its original source and manipulated into kitsch, renders it devoid of cultural significance. It is this loss of meaning through adopted symbols that interests me.

In examining ornament, I am not involved in appropriating the traditional ornament of a specific culture, as Joyce Kozloff and Neil Forrest are (their contributions are discussed in more depth later on). I am more concerned with the ornament that has a traditional cultural source, but has been transformed, conventionalized, and packaged as consumable imagery. While Forrest is looking to Islam for a source of his imagery, I am looking to generic ornate patterns found commercially that speak to a mass produced indulgence in seemingly natural ornament.

Chapter Two

2.1 Ornament, Pattern, Decoration

Figure 5: Stephanie Jonsson, *Violet Unfurled*, 2010. Ceramic, plywood, spray paint. 60” x 60” x 2”. Photo: Adam Stenhouse. Used by permission of the artist.

Often the terms ornament and decoration are used interchangeably, and some even claim that ornament and decoration are synonymous (Brolin). A more contemporary definition from Webster's dictionary is more succinct, describing ornament as "something that lends grace or beauty" or "a manner or quality that adorns." ("Ornament"). Although it is exceedingly common to use the terms ornament and decoration interchangeably, it is important not to confuse them, as they refer to related but are separate things. Art historian John Kresten Jespersen notes that the Oxford English Dictionary offers a clear distinction between the two:

> essentially ornament refers to the thing acting as an embellishment and decoration refers to everything which functions as embellishment, which may or may not include ornament" (Jespersen 12).

Decoration's agenda, according to Jespersen, is concerned with the distribution of the ornament in architectural space whereas ornament refers only to a "specific visual entity" (Jespersen 13).[6] In this definition, ornament is a form of embellishment that is a sub-category of decoration. Decoration is a broader term that includes ornament, specifically where it embellishes architectural space.

[6] Of course, Jespersen is speaking in the context of architecture, but decoration embellishes many other things such as objects and images.

Perhaps a deeper, more rigorous definition of these terms is in order. James Trilling, in his book “Ornament: A Modern Perspective”, defines ornament as

> …separable from the functional shape of the object. If you want to know whether a particular feature of an object is ornament, try imagining it away. If the object remains structurally intact, and recognizable, and can still perform its function, the feature is decoration and may well be ornament. (Trilling 21)

This is a useful definition to begin thinking about ornament in an applied sense, especially in terms of architecture and sculptural objects. In addition to its distinction from decoration, ornament is to be differentiated from pattern, which the Oxford English Dictionary defines as a *repeated* decorative design (“Pattern”, my emphasis). Therefore, ornament and decoration are not synonymous with pattern, but an ornament may contribute to a pattern by utilizing a repeating shape, colour, or design element. Patterns are often “integrated, composed of distinct motifs, orderly and predictable even at their most intricate” (Trilling 9). Amy Goldin notes that “pattern has traditionally been used to embellish a given form; rarely, if ever, has it been expected to provide an experience of form in itself” (Goldin 12). The same can be said of ornament and decoration, they are usually considered as “extra” or additions to an already existing object. The next

section considers the Modernist agenda and how it rendered ornament, pattern and decoration as arbitrarily extraneous to a successful artwork, ostensibly removing it from an entire aesthetic sensibility. This was, according to feminist thinkers, because the decorative was associated with the feminine.

2.2 The Role of Ornament in Modernism

Figure 6: Stephanie Jonsson, *The Architecture of Ornament (detail),* 2011. Plywood, spray paint. Variable dimensions. Photo: Elisa Ferrari. Used by permission of the artist.

The modernist rejection of ornament has taught architects, designers, and critics, especially of the last decade, to appreciate “the beauty of the necessary: of undisguised materials, unconcealed techniques, and functional form” (Trilling 4). Under the laws of modernist aesthetics, ornament is rendered as unnecessary and superfluous.

This rejection of ornament can easily be traced back to Aldolf Loos. In 1908, Loos published the essay “Ornament and Crime.” As the manifesto's title suggests, Loos was highly critical of an ornamental approach to architecture and design. In this and many other essays he contributed to the elaboration of a body of theory and criticism on Modernism in architecture. Loos goes so far as to equate ornament with crime, and says “the evolution of culture is synonymous with the removal of ornament from utilitarian objects” (Loos 168). He asserts that not only is ornament produced by criminals, but also a crime is committed through the fact that ornament inflicts serious injury on people’s health, on the national budget and, hence, on cultural evolution. His argument is primarily one of economics: “The ornamentor has to work twenty hours to achieve the income earned by a modern worker in eight” (Loos 170). Reyner Banham, a prolific architectural critic and writer best known for his book *Theory and Design in the First Machine Age* (1960), suggests that Loos’ essay was a significant influence on the abolishment of decoration in Modernism. Banham states with certainty that

> it is impossible now to imagine how the Modern Movement might have looked as a decorated style, but it might have been just that, had not its creators had ringing in their ears Loos' challenging equation: "Ornament Equals Crime" (Banham 88).

So strong was Loos' sentiment, that few have escaped the conversion and many architects and designers are still ornamentally paralyzed more than a century later.

Although this abandonment of ornament was first articulated in the realm of architecture, the general attitude towards ornament following Loos' harsh determination created a pervasiveness during Modernism that allowed the idea to spread to multiple disciplines, including painting, sculpture, and interior design.

My work challenges these Modernist credos and states that ornament is not insignificant by presenting it as an aesthetic art object – something that implicitly demands attention and careful consideration. By displaying an abundance of ornament in the austere white space of the gallery, I hope to provoke the viewer to re-examine their relationship to ornament and its relevance in our society today. In many ways, I have posed what seems to be a kind of nineteen eighties or nineteen nineties set of questions (from the Pattern and Decoration movement through to the height of post-modernist deconstruction). Although this line of questioning may seem outdated, it is still relevant to me personally, given the strict abolition of ornament in my Modernist upbringing.

2.3 Ornament and Gender

Cheryl Buckley, an author who has written numerous articles, chapters, and books on women and gender in design, fashion, and ceramics, notes that during the early decades of the twentieth century that a decorative vocabulary was associated with the 'feminine':

> … the desire by 1930s design critics and historians to narrowly define modernism in terms of European practices emerged against a backdrop of social, political and cultural anxiety about gender. In particular there was widespread fear in the early decades of the century that British culture was being in some way feminized, infected by a 'feminine' sensibility which was domestic, insular and essentially decorative." (Buckley 54)

During Modernism's establishment from 1910 to 1940, the domestic and the feminine were omitted from art and architecture. Feminist art historian Whitney Chadwick asserted that decoration had a significant part in the advancement of Modernist art in the early 1900's. She also points out, however, that for artists like Kandinsky, this relationship to the decorative included an unspoken peril that the abstract, formal language in progress would be read as 'decorative' and consequently lack content (Chadwick 237)[7]. To take this point

[7] Ironically, Kandinsky reproductions are now found as decoration in restaurants.

further, author Christopher Reed argues that in addition to the fear of decoration, there was also a general terror of the

> "… domestic, perpetually invoked in order to be denied, [which] remains throughout the course of modernism a crucial site of anxiety and subversion". (Reed 16)

This anxiety around all things feminine and decorative was present in my undergraduate Modernist training, and the use of overtly feminine patterns in my practice is a strong response to this formative experience. Although the fear of ornament is no longer as present as it was during Modernism, it is still relevant to my practice and important for me to respond to. Artists have reacted to the past and to their own personal experiences throughout history, and the rationale behind responding to Modernism in my own practice comes from a deeply personal place in my relationship with Modernism.

2.4 Ornament in Nature

> "Whenever a style of ornament commands universal admiration, it will always be found in accordance with laws which regulate the distribution of form in nature".
>
> - Owen Jones, The Grammar of Ornament, 1856

Ralph Waldo Emerson states that "Nature, in the common sense, refers to essences unchanged by man; space, the air, the river, the leaf (Emerson 9)".

This nineteenth century view of nature was idealistic, representing nature as a perfect utopia. It also assumed that humans and things made by them are considered unique and distinct from nature, and perhaps the source of nature's decline. Contemporary Slovenian philosopher and cultural critic Slavoj Zizek does not think of nature as "a harmonious, organic, balanced, reproducing, almost living organism", which is then "disturbed, perturbed, and derailed" through human intervention (*Examined Life*). Instead, he suggests that nature is a big series of unimaginable catastrophes. These events are occasionally contained, and then they explode again. He suggests that, as humans, "We should not forget that we are not abstract engineers, theorists who just exploit nature – that we are part of nature, that nature is our unfathomable, impenetrable background (*Examined Life*)". Considering it in this way, without more generalized assumptions, allows for different perspectives on potential trajectories towards thinking about ornament in nature.

When I refer to "nature" or the "natural" in the visual body of work, it operates as part of something manmade. It is only paradoxical if one subscribes to the nineteenth century definitions of nature, as something from which we are separate. My sculpture functions more as part of Zizek's definition. It does not distinguish between natural and manmade, but is simultaneously references both of these things. My work is not nature, but it uses imagery inspired by nature. In conceptualizing these ideas, however, I tend to think of nature as separate from things that are manmade, and consent to Emerson's approach to defining nature.

This is an important distinction in the work, as Emerson's approach is more binary, and subsequently more defined and less complex. My material practice, however, is a hybrid of natural imagery and manmade imagery, not one or the other.

It is fascinating to me when humans appropriate and pervert the natural world to their own end. Nature throughout history has been a source of inspiration for artists, designers, and architects alike. David Bret notes that phrases such as the "laws of nature", and "the laws of growth", and "nature's plan", are found throughout the literature in Britain in the nineteenth century, especially where ornament is involved in botanical design (37). Because of my own interest as well as the wealth of writing, I am situating much of my research and practice in these nineteenth century views of ornament and the handmade.

It can be argued that, as far as ornament may stray from natural form, it is ultimately derived from it. Lewis F. Day in his book, *Nature in Ornament* (1902), describes how various trees and plants recall ornament in their structure:

> Nature seems to neglect no opportunity; the very scars left on the stems of certain trees, such as the horse-chestnut, form a kind of decoration. Even in the scarred stalk of an old cabbage you may see pattern. In the case of the palm, the remains of the leaves of years past resolve themselves still more plainly into ornament; and for once the Roman sculptors, who saw

palm-trees growing about them, adopted the idea in the decoration of their columns." (Day 17)

The patterns (or repetition of ornament) that natural forms engender have been an inspiration for British designers for many centuries, and in particular the field of botanical morphology received a considerable amount of attention in the early nineteenth century (Bret 38). Leading botanists formed a part of design teaching called "art-botany". This was the study of plant forms for the purpose of decoration, in particular the researching of plant forms and laws that preside over the character of branches and stems (Bret 38). The study of decoration and ornament was treated as if it were a natural part of biology – it was examined through "collection, description and taxonomy" (Bret 38). Flourishing decorative artists in the 1850s were at an advantage if they also possessed the skills of practical botanists.

Richard Redgrave, in his "Passages from the Lectures on the Study of Botany by the Designer", published in 1850, urged his students to pay close attention to the form of leaves of various plants, as well as the textures and colours. He recommended drawing many sorts of leaves, as well as taking casts. This did not lead to a naturalistic rendering of the plant in question, but rather an amalgamation of all plants. According to Redgrave, the "true form of the leaf of a plant is only to be found by comparing many leaves" (Redgrave 98). In this way,

the stylistic rendering of the leaf and other forms of nature moved away from realistic representation to an ornamented and symbolic abstraction of all leaves.

Over time, architects, designers, and artists have started to look less to nature as a source, and more to a facsimile of a synthetic nature. Lewis Day comments that during the early nineteenth century, designers were not interested in capturing a naturalistic representation of a tendril from a plant, rather they were searching for a form that spoke to a universal plant. Victorian architects and theorists including A. W. N. Pugin, John Ruskin, Owen Jones, and William Morris were interested in the conventional aspects of ornament inspired by nature. Conventionalization was a theory and applied strategy employed by nineteenth century architects and theorists in their engagement and preoccupation with ornament in nature. The practice of conventionalization was a stylization of the leaf ornament. Ralph Wornum, a Victorian librarian, stated in his *Analysis of Design of 1856* that "a plant is said to be conventionally treated when the natural order of its growth or development is disregarded" (Wornum 15). So, asymmetry in the veins of a leaf would be abandoned in favor of symmetrical cutouts. Flatness and geometrical stylization are also seen in Victorian examples of conventionalization. This reduction or stylization of the plant form in order to confirm to anthropocentric systems of order is precisely the type of appropriation in which I am interested.

Figure 7: Stephanie Jonsson, *Solar Powered Plastic Plant, 2011.* Ceramic, spray paint 36" x 24" x 2". Photo: Stephanie Jonsson. Used by permission of the artist.

In *Solar Powered Plastic Plant* (Figure 7), a work I produced in 2011, the stenciled spray paint is a striking bright green, a colour that would not normally

be found in nature. The bulbous ceramic elements appear similarly round but not uniform, as if they were a naturally occurring structure like a wasp's nest or coral. The vines and tendrils that surround the structure are stylized and conform to a (logical) symmetry that neatly frames the three dimensional element of the work. This composition of perfectly round tendrils, not found in nature, is contrasted with the organic splatter of spray paint where the form meets the edge of the stencil. The object is at once referencing nature and things fabricated by humans, utilizing natural imagery through manmade materials.

Chapter Three: Craft

3.1 Breaking down Binaries: Craft and Art

Craft as a concept is as complex as ornament or decoration. Bruce Metcalf defines craft as having four simultaneous characteristics in his essay "Replacing the Myth of Modernism", originally published in 1993 (5). First, Metcalf asserts, craft is usually made substantially by hand. Second, craft is medium specific: it is always identified with a material and the technologies invented to manipulate it. For example, ceramics, woodworking, metalsmithing, and weaving are all disciplines specific to a medium and its mastery. Third, craft is defined by use. Craft disciplines are traditional groupings of functional objects – jewelry, clothing, furniture, pottery, etc. Importantly, Metcalf has a limiting statement here:

craft in his definition does not include manufactured objects like small appliances, airplanes, or telephone equipment. Fourth, craft is defined by its past. Each of the craft disciplines has a multicultural history that is recorded mostly in the form of objects, many from societies that have long since disappeared (5).

There are many good reasons for challenging Modernism in relation to craft, or vice versa, namely the continued marginalization of craft within many cultural institutions (Alfoldy xxi). Garth Clark asks whether or not ceramics was involved or made a significant addition to the history of the Avant-Garde of the fine arts majority in the first half of the twentieth century. In his book, *Shards*, he questions this and ponders why ceramics as a discipline was never acknowledged as a participant during this time, if it did make a contribution at all (Clark 330). Furthermore, Clark wonders, if ceramics was never a part of the Avant-Garde of the fine arts mainstream, then why was it not included in this dialogue? The lack of critical writing in the case of some well-known ceramic artists such as Kim Dickey is evidence that craft has a marginalized position in contemporary critical discourse. Historically, it illustrates a shift in attitude over the years. In my own practice, I have shown in both traditional fine art galleries as well as galleries dedicated solely to craft. My work exists in a liminal space that consciously attempts to defy these definitions of craft and art.

During the nineteenth century the contemporary understanding of craft as marginalized practice was fully articulated. Sandra Alfoldy, a writer on contemporary craft, notes that “the ‘mechanical arts’ gave way to the terms

'handicrafts', 'minor arts', 'lesser arts' and 'applied arts', and the ideas of the design reformers Augustus Pugin, John Ruskin and William Morris laid the foundations for the twentieth-century craft movement" (Alfoldy xvi – xvii). Contemporary craft discourse is still wrestling with how to situate the Modernist criticism of Greenberg, a sworn enemy of craft. In his 1939 essay "Avant Garde and Kitsch," Greenberg examines the relationship between aesthetic experience and individual, social, and historical contexts. He made efforts to separate everyday objects, including utilitarian crafts, from avant-garde art (Alfoldy xx). In his keynote address to the First International Ceramics Symposium at Syracuse University in 1979, however, Greenberg admits in his earlier writing, he "…did in the past give in, as other people have, to the notion that ceramics was largely craft, and that craft was just craft" (Greenberg 3). He goes on to say that society should accept "ceramics proper" into "sculpture proper", essentially eliminating the lines between fine art and craft (Greenberg 5).

Sandra Alfoldy agrees that it is time to rethink our easy dismissal of critics like Greenberg, and our association of crafts with all things anti-modern. She maintains that although Greenberg, in his early writing, marginalized work that utilized craft materials, he eventually decided to embrace craft. In addition, many of his Modernist peers were in support of craft as a discipline. According to Alfoldy, the art critic Harold Rosenberg, predominantly in his art criticism, invited the crafts to be part of modern art discourse (xxi). In his talk, "Art and Work", Rosenberg addresses the First Wold Congress of Craftsmen in New York in

1964, stating that "…the fine artist and the inventive craftsman are indistinguishable from each other. It is regrettable that an inherited hierarchy makes it more desirable to be an artist than an artisan" (Rosenberg 427). He goes on to refer to the arts and crafts interchangeably, giving them equal footing in the critical discourse.

More recently, formalism is no longer the dominating force it once was. Postmodern craft artists have brought about a variety of conceptual reformations that often place the formal qualities of the work as secondary to the concept. I will discuss their contribution later.

In addition, a more contemporary definition of craft does not necessarily include specificity to material as it once did. Many contemporary artists use craft materials in their work, demonstrating how hierarchies are less rigid. Garth Clark asserts that there is a paradigm shift and that "the notion of a single-medium artist is under threat" (Clark 352). Art education is in Europe and the United States are doing away with medium specialties and changing in favour of a cross disciplinary pluralism in which any and all media are part of the combination. Artists who employ craft strategies and materials do not seem to be fighting against the marginalization of craft as much as they were even ten years ago. Hierarchies are shifting to include craft in the contemporary art scene.

Ai Wei Wei's recent exhibition, titled "Sunflower Seeds", was exhibited at the Tate Modern in 2010. The installation, consisting of millions of handmade porcelain sunflower seeds, incorporated craft materials in a contemporary gallery

setting. It was a particularly publicized event, partially due to the political actions that followed the exhibition and the dust residue of the materials, but it proved to be a revealing instance of the inclusion of craft into the art gallery. This generalized shift in hierarchies has been formative in my practice and considerations of what defines craft. A variety of materials are currently accepted in a broader context with increasing frequency, and clay, for example, is not necessarily synonymous with craft any longer.

3.2 Three case studies

Craft has emerged from its marginalized position. I am particularly interested in this phenomenon as well as the inherent friction between fine art and craft. More recently, Metcalf's definition of craft and its four characteristics have shifted: now it seems that specific materials are being freed of associations with a particular discipline.

Neil Forrest, Kim Dickey, and Cal Lane are three artists who each address ornament in their work through the use of craft mediums such as ceramics and metalsmithing. I am intrigued by these artistic practices as they inform the exploration of ornament in my own work.

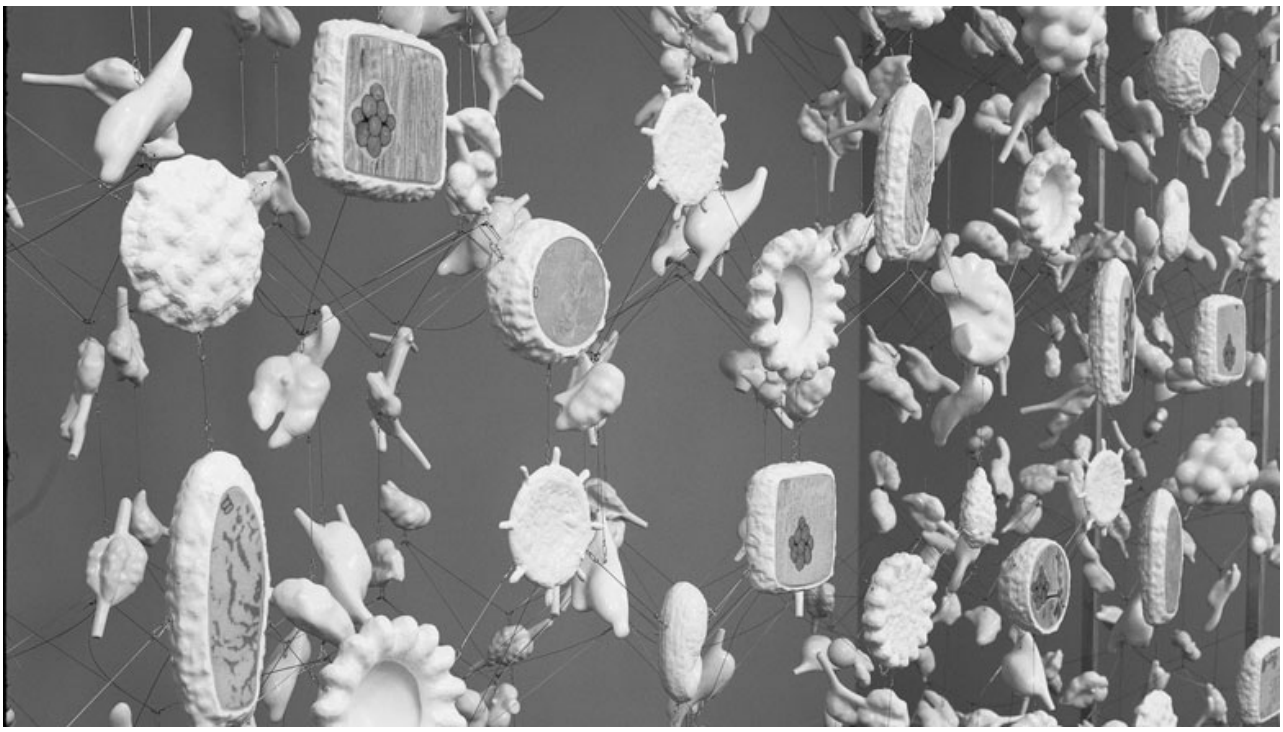

Figure 8: Neil Forrest, *Hiving Mesh,* 1999 – 02. Mixed Media, dimensions variable. Photo: Neil Forrest. Used by permission of the artist.

Neil Forrest uses various systems of interconnecting ceramic nodes that hang suspended in the air, creating both a wall and a matrix of linking elements. His piece, *Hiving Mesh* (Figure 8)*,* is generated as dimensional ornament that is inspired by the distinctive curves of arabesque and muqarna of Islamic ornamentation. Forrest's porcelain scaffolds, resembling coral environments, represent ceramic ornament in response to contemporary architecture. Unlike Forrest, I do not use overt architectural references, but in the example of *Corner Piece, 2011* (Figure 9), I explore how my work can fit into a specific architectural space by using materials of the surrounding environment (such as concrete). This particular piece was built to fit into a corner perfectly. This experiment in concrete was a departure from the trajectory of my previous practice because it

was incredibly unassuming. I wanted the work to blend into the architecture and critique the space, instead of overpowering it. The piece surprises the viewer because it is unexpected, nestled into the corner and occupies a very unimportant part of the gallery floor.

Figure 9: Stephanie Jonsson, *Corner Piece,* 2011. Concrete, ¾" x 18" x 13". Photo: Stephanie Jonsson. Used by permission of the artist.

Ornament has traditionally been treated as a surface design, something that is applied to a structure as an afterthought. If we recall James Trilling's definition of ornament, it asks the viewer to try imagining the ornament away. According to Trilling, "if the object remains structurally intact, and recognizable,

and can still perform its function, the feature is decoration and may well be ornament" (Trilling 21). This definition becomes problematic when the ornament is embedded into and integral to the structure of the object, and cannot be imagined away without altering the form. In his work, Forrest is

> […] looking at ways to detach ornament from its conventional role as skin, then dimensionalize it. This is a space that interlocks in order to support itself, independent of architecture's tectonics. Using the metaphor of colony, multi-layered ceramic fragments plug in to their neighbours, creating an artificial experience from patterned space. (Forrest 4)

In this way, the artist uses veiled and dimensional sculpture to alter three-dimensional space, working against the concept of ornament as applied as a decorative surface.

A second ceramic artist with architectural inclinations informing my interest in ornament is Kim Dickey. In a recent exhibition in Denver, Colorado called "All Is Leaf," Dickey alludes to the architectural elements of a formal garden. Her constructions of artificial gardens in clay contain leaves that are not botanically correct. Instead they are descendants of stylized leaves, such as the quatrefoil, found throughout decorative-arts history. In this exhibition, Dickey also references specific Minimalist forms. Her sculptural ceramics allude directly to Robert Morris'

structures from 1964, Those works were derived from basic construction elements, such as an L beam or plank (MacMillan 1). Minimalism removed ornament from its streamlined and simple sculptural forms, and Dickey's postmodern defiance of those intentions is similar to my own artistic response to Minimalism.

Dickey's use of the quatrefoil has another parallel in my work, as I often incorporate stylized forms of nature that are generic in appearance. The imagery she uses of flora and fauna mimic nature, but the resulting sculpture has an overall geometric shape. She uses many compartmentalized and discrete modular ceramic elements that are similar in size, shape and colour to create an overall pattern in her walls, such as in *Inverted L Beam #2* (Figure 10).

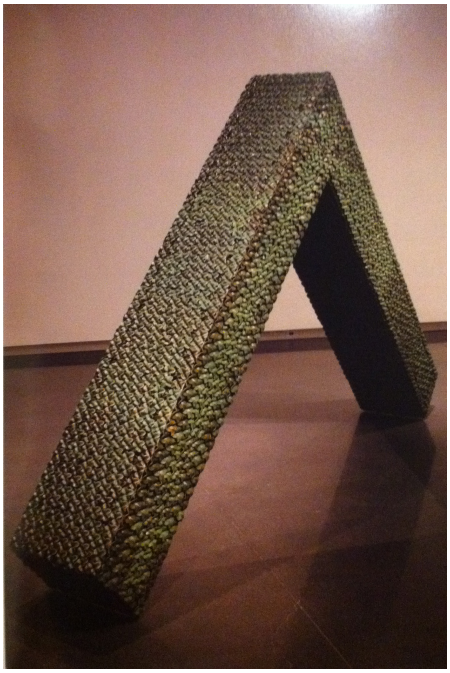

Figure 10, Kim Dickey, *Inverted L Beam #2,* 2011. Aluminum, glazed terra cotta, silicon, and rubber grommets. Photo: Kim Dickey. Used by permission of the artist.

The methodology by which Dickey employs repeated elements in her work to construct a sculptural wall of leaves is not unlike Neil Forrest's use of the modular wall. While Dickey creates a solid mass of wall that is impenetrable, Forrest's work produces a veiled dimension and an ornamentation that pierces three-dimensional space. In my ceramic artwork, I use ornament to compose a field that mounts on the wall or floor. Like these examples by Forrest and Dickey, my pieces are dependent on the architectural structures surrounding them. My sculptures physically rely on the walls and floors of the space, and in the case of my thesis project, pierce through the gallery wall.

Finally, the last artist I would like to examine is Cal Lane. The work of Cal Lane shifts traditionally female ornate sources such as doilies and tablecloths onto metal tools and objects which are traditionally gendered male[8]. She calls to mind all things feminine with her lace cutouts: lacemaking, cake decorating and traditional "women's work" (Pomerance 1). Using a plasma torch, Lane makes lace like patterns out of rusted metal objects such as shovels, cars, or other industrial tools and transforms them into fragile, flower-patterned cutouts (Figure 11). Lane "wields an industrial blowtorch as if it were a crochet hook", rendering the tools useless by their decorative patterning (Driedger 40).

[8] Due to the word limit, I cannot go into detail on traditional gender roles and gender in my work.

Figure 11: Cal Lane, *5 Shovels*, 2005. Oxy-acetylene cut steel shovels, dimensions variable. Photo: Cal Lane. Used by permission of the artist.,

Her work is handmade, and involves a great degree of manual labour (Pomerance 1). The repetitive and obsessive act of tracing lace on to the metal, then painstakingly cutting out each piece pays homage to the handmade cakes and tablecloths that inspire her sculptures. Like Lane, my work often utilizes floral imagery and has the same rough around the edges quality. In my practice, decidedly feminine patterns are strongly juxtaposed against hard steel and plywood surfaces. Similar to Lane, my practice is equally obsessive, as I will often repeat the same pattern over and over, cutting the imagery out of clay and creating a stencil. Our work shares an interest in the handmade, craft, and ornate imagery. There is a visual contradiction in Lane's work, the rusted metal objects are at once attractive and repulsive. In my own practice, I aim to conjure up this kind of response, repelling the viewer with gaudy colours while simultaneously compelling them to take a deeper look by utilizing captivating curvilinear forms.

My practice is a response to my Modernist artistic education, celebrating a departure from the Modernist ideals of sparing form, material, surface and authorship. In my work, I interrupt the austere white cube of the gallery by inserting an overwhelming and all encompassing ornament into it. This is a continuation of the ideas and goals set forth by Joyce Kozloff and the artists of the Pattern and Decoration movement of the seventies and eighties. In generating work that sits in an uncomfortable space between painting, sculpture and installation, I am attempting to rupture the grid by disassembling and re-assembling source patterns into objects that recall aging architectural details, broken Victorian porcelain or crumbling modernist ideologies. The ceramic pieces are fractured and dismantled, similar to the work of Neil Forrest and Kim Dickey. These pieces respond to the architectural elements in which they are installed, spreading out along the length of a wall, into the corners of rooms and onto the floor.

Figure 12: Stephanie Jonsson, *35 Ceramic Square, 2011.* Ceramic, 60" x 60" Photo: Stephanie Jonsson. Used by permission of the artist.

I have attempted here to demonstrate how the concepts of craft, ornament, and Modernism have been embedded in my practice and how some of these terms have shifted over time. Through an introduction to three examples of influence (Neil Forrest, Kim Dickey and Cal Lane), I am positioning my work within a historical and contemporary context.

Summary

My time at Emily Carr University allowed me to develop a deeper relationship with content and multifaceted critical thinking in my practice. The thesis work has pushed the idea of adopting organic, natural forms to a more considered use of ornament, pattern and decoration. At this point in my practice, I think about how appropriating this imagery impacts the reading of the work. I am more aware of conscious choices around which specific patterns I appropriate, and their cultural significance.

I now question the rules and principles of Modernism critically, while maintaining a practice that appreciates formalism. My thinking has changed, and I subsequently consider the intellectual reasons behind my aesthetic choices to be driven by the concept of the work in tandem with purely aesthetic considerations, not dominated solely by the latter.

My inquisitions into the status and history of craft have opened up a new area of research that I was not familiar with before this degree. This has

consequentially helped me to understand myself as a gendered visual artist working with craft. My intention moving forward is to continue using an organic visual vocabulary in craft techniques, with a focus on the feminine and domestic labour. I am currently working on a piece that utilizes laser-cut felt, incorporating an obfuscated William Morris pattern that was transformed and altered from the original source through a happy accident. I would like to move more towards installations and environments that overwhelm the entire gallery space and build off of pre-existing architectural structures. I endeavour to continue working with craft materials and sculptural objects that hang on the wall and fall to the floor. Another objective in the future will be to appropriate historical patterns and ornament from the past that once had a specific function, removing them from their original context.

The evolution of my work during this degree and the development of my practice have led me to delve further into ornament, which was only a small part of my past practice. I could not have anticipated the meandering path that I have taken to get to this point in my expedition, a journey that my fascination with ornament in nature has truly provoked and encouraged.

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